

Church is center of life in Cooperstown

St. James' defines village attitudes

By Tom Vanden Brook

Press-Gazette

COOPERSTOWN — St. James Catholic Church, a massive red brick building, dwarfs this tiny Manitowoc County village.

Its looming presence seems incongruous for such a sleepy hamlet. How could a village with fewer houses than pews fill the church for services?

"Everybody says Cooperstown is the church," Jean Schleis said. "The church is Cooperstown."

And so it appears.

Parishioners flock to the church from near and far in impressive numbers — 771 all told — according to Schleis, the church secretary. But the building is more than just a spiritual center for Cooperstown residents. Worshipers hail from Curran, Denmark and Maribel as well. Moreover, the church acts as the area's social mecca.

Schleis, 40, said that aside from a regular schedule of well-attended Masses, activities such as card games and educational programs occur four or five nights per week.

At a time when urban churches are closing their doors because of rising costs and dropping attendance, St. James is headed in the opposite direction.

"It's a very active church community and we're growing all the time," Schleis said. "I'm always sending out materials to new parishioners."

Schleis said much of the credit for the church's growing popularity belongs to the Rev. Thomas Stocker, whose ability to relate to parishioners is unmatched.

And the trend toward increased enrollment will be assured for some time. Schleis noted that a religious studies program for children has an enrollment of 180.

"The young people are claiming ownership of the parish now," Schleis said. "And that's nice."

It is a revival of sorts for a village whose identity centered on the almost forgotten legacy of its days as a regional hub



Share a laugh: John Schlies, left, son of Sandy and Bob Schlies, Maribel, and Sam Schaetz, son of Joe and Lu Ann Schaetz, Denmark, laugh during Confraternity of Christian Doctrine class at St. James Catholic Church, Cooperstown. Both are in a fifth-grade class taught by Jean Schleis of rural Maribel.

for travelers and agriculture.

Arlene Mease, the town clerk of Cooperstown who describes herself as something of a history nut, said the village of Cooperstown thrived in the mid-19th century. The community took its name from an early settler, Alen A. Cooper, who also served as Cooperstown's first postmaster.

As a convenient resting point halfway between Two Rivers and Green Bay, a service industry sprung up to serve weary travelers.

Mease said hotels, taverns, livery sta-

Please see **Places/B-2**



This weekly feature looks at small area communities and the people who make them tick.

The Cooperstown file

- ☐ First business, Joseph Edwards' tavern built in 1841
- ☐ Township founded in 1856
- ☐ St. James Catholic Church founded in 1850
- ☐ 170 parishioners in 1967
- ☐ 771 parishioners in 1990

Press-Gazette photos by John A. Robb and Joan Gutheridge



Focal point: St. James Catholic Church is a center of activity in Cooperstown. The church's pastor is the Rev. Thomas Stocker.

Church enrollment is high and so is attendance at religion classes for children, church officials say.



Cooperstown clerk: Arlene Mease explains some of the history of Cooperstown, where she serves as town clerk.

Places

bles and a photography shop did booming business. Cooperstown also claimed several doctors, its own post office and farm implement store.

"Mainly it was built up because of the stagecoach run," said Mease, 51. "And all those little businesses built up around it."

But railroads supplanted the stagecoach. And when the railroad bypassed Cooperstown, businesses left, too.

However, the church, established in 1850, remained strong as did its people's long-standing ties to the land.

Today, farmers and commuters to businesses in larger communities make up the bulk of its population. But while many work elsewhere, they prefer to live and worship in Cooperstown.

The reasons are simple, said Shirley Bradley.

"This is a good place for families," said Bradley, a 39-year-old mother of four boys. "The area is safe, too. You don't have to worry about drugs or your kids being kidnapped. Nothing like that."

Cooperstown also is a place where neighbors look out for each other. Bradley said the pitch-in-and-help-out attitude stemmed from the farming background that most people share. But she added that it extends to non-farming families like the Bradleys as well.

She said her sons — Paul, Scott, Mark and Gary — often hire themselves out to area farmers who need a helping hand.

And, not surprisingly, Bradley pointed to the church as the area's prime contributor to that attitude.

She said a recent auto accident near the church, in which a woman was seriously injured showed the best Cooperstown had to offer. Parishioners, milling in the parking lot after an evening church activity, rushed to the woman's aid and presided over rescue efforts.

"You can count on everyone in Cooperstown to help out," Bradley said. "It doesn't matter who needs help. If somebody's sick, someone else will cook for them. Or, like in that accident, people do whatever they can."

"Everybody is just sort of on call for everybody else," she said.

■ **Next week:** Cecil in Shawano County